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SUBJ: KAZAKHSTAN: REACTION TO CARTOON CONTROVERSY

¶11. SUMMARY. Public reaction and comment by Kazakhstanis (almost half of whom are Muslim) on the cartoon controversy started February 9, after several days of primetime news reports of international events. One local man known for eccentric behavior led a small protest against "insulting any nation." A teacher-student advocacy group sent a letter to the Danish prime minister, asking the West not to abuse freedom of speech and to adopt a code of ethics. Opinion makers generally denounced the cartoons and urged Western media to not publish images with the potential to provoke violence. A Jewish community leader said the violent reaction discredited Islam and he called for tolerance on all sides. Kazakh language press interpreted the controversy as a "clash of civilizations," while Russian language media speculated on which side benefited, and whether the controversy could provoke a strike on the "axis of evil" countries. END SUMMARY.

¶12. Most public reaction in Kazakhstan to the controversy began several days after primetime news broadcasts had been reporting international reaction to the cartoons. The first statement was issued February 6 by Omirbek Ongar, press secretary of the Spiritual Directorate of Kazakhstan's Muslims. He said, "We hold an extremely negative view of the publishing of the Prophet Muhammad's cartoons. . . We support our Muslim brothers from other countries, who have also condemned this." On February 9 centrist national broadcaster Channel 31 carried two reports on the evening news about how the "international crisis of civilizations had reached Kazakhstan." Asylbek Amantay, well known for his public protests, led about 30 supporters in a demonstration in Almaty. "As God is great, so is his prophet. We oppose in general insulting any nation. Ninety percent of the prophets are descended from the Jews." (Last May when Amantay led a protest against desecration of the Koran, his supporters carried placards reading, "Yankees out of the Soviet Union.")

Civil Leaders Denounce Images, Appeal for Calm

¶13. The Channel 31 report also covered reaction from the teacher-student advocacy group Bolashak, which sent a letter to the Danish prime minister, asking the West not to abuse freedom of speech and to develop an international code of ethics. Chairman Farkhad Kasenov said that he believes the West intends to start a "cold war" with the East, and is discrediting Islam, which he said is a

peaceful religion. Although he said he thought reaction in other countries was understandable, his group does not advocate "pogroms." Akhmetzhan Kerimbekov, the imam for the Southern Kazakhstan Mosque said, "Allah himself formed Mohammed and He Himself protects Him. We need not worry or undertake any kind of protest action. We must preserve tranquility and rely on the will of Allah." Safar Abdullo, a scholar of eastern studies, appealed for "dialogue, mutual understanding and respect, otherwise, nothing good can come from this."

Kazakh Publications: "Clash of Civilizations"

¶4. Some Kazakh language newspapers, most of whose readers are Muslim, expressed the issue as a "conflict of civilizations" deliberately provoked by the West. Progressive Kazakh language Zhas Alash published the opinion of a prominent local theologian Murtaza Bulutai February 9: "The West knows perfectly well that depicting images of the prophet Mohammed is strictly prohibited and that the Muslim community will not tolerate taunts. . . . Mocking the prophet Mohammed cannot be justified by any freedom of speech! This is a provocation! . . . There are groups in the West that regard both Muslims and Muslim countries with suspicion. How long has Turkey been trying to join the EU? For 45 years! The EU keeps bouncing Turkey back. . . because Turkey is a country of Muslims." (Note: Almost half of the country's population of 15 million are Muslim.)

¶5. Pro-government Kazakh language Aikyn speculated in their February 9 issue on the threat of "another fire in the Persian Gulf." "The world is facing another challenge.

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The perverted pictures of the prophet Mohammed published by western media started a conflict between the European and Muslim worlds. Protest actions against the West that started in Islamic countries can bring Muslims of European countries into the streets. These protests may spread to all the countries that published images of Mohammed. If so, it will be difficult to control the situation."

Jewish Community Leader Calls for Stability and Tolerance

¶6. Pro-government Ekspress K carried an opinion piece emphasizing points in common between Judaism and Islam and calling for religious tolerance. The paper is reputedly owned by wealthy entrepreneur Aleksandr Mashkevich, president of the Eurasian Jewish Congress, and a close friend of President Nazarbayev. "What is taking place in some Islamic countries has nothing to do with true religion. Some heart-broken Muslims have already forgotten that as soon as sacrilegious caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad appeared, prominent Jewish figures were among the first who condemned it. For example, the president of the largest Jewish organization, the Eurasian Jewish Congress, Aleksandr Mashkevich said words heard by every Muslim on the planet, 'Today, our duty is to put aside our disagreements, to help our Muslim brothers to restore their desecrated dignity and justice.'" The author writes that the contest sponsored by an Iranian newspaper for caricatures of the Holocaust is a blow against Islam itself and the global Muslim community. "This blasphemy will only strengthen the positions of their enemies, who call Islam an aggressive religion. All the aforementioned once again emphasizes the importance of stability in our multi-national, multi-confessional country. We should be mindful that no fanatics can influence life in our country. Let's be tolerant of any true religion and tolerant of any manifestation of intolerance!"

Both Sides to Blame for Conflict, but Who Benefits?

17. Pro-government Russian language weekly Novoye Pokoleniye February 10 referred to "the game of freedom of speech" in Europe, which provoked Islamic leaders into forgetting their history and the traditional wisdom of their faith. "Danish journalists (and together with them those who reprinted the caricatures in Spain, France, Germany, and Italy) could not be unaware that the game of freedom of speech in reality plumbs the depths of misfortune. . . However, the sharp reaction of Islamic governments to caricatures is no less striking than the so-called theological illiteracy of the Europeans. . . Is it possible that leaders of Islamic countries forgot their history, lost their traditional wisdom accumulated through the centuries and allowed themselves to give in to such an essentially cheap provocation? Why exactly now were true believers offended by images published last September in an unknown newspaper? Now when the nuclear report of Iran could be sent to the UN Security Council. Now when the U.S. president unambiguously speaks about possible war with Iran. Now when the radical organization Hamas has come to power in Palestine and on the eve of parliamentary elections in Israel. The fragile world in the Middle East again hangs by a thread. Someone benefits from this."

West Will Use Conflict to Justify Military Strikes on East

18. The question of who benefits was answered in this piece in pro-government Russian language weekly Delovaya Nedelya February 10. "No matter how paradoxical it sounds, the current situation is beneficial not only to 'rogue states,' but also to the West. Reports from Syria, Lebanon, and Iran are strong arguments in favor of a next strike on 'the axis of evil.' A military operation in the East will be perceived by average Westerners as something inevitable . . . to protect democratic freedoms in general, and freedom of speech in particular. Meanwhile, some Asian leaders . . . came forward with conciliatory statements. . . Such statements raise optimism, because as long as they are being said, pessimistic forecasts will probably remain only forecasts."

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Cartoonists Poorly Brought Up; We all Lack Tolerance

19. In an article for pro-government daily Ekspress K February 10, a political cartoonist for the progressive weekly Vremya criticized not only those who took freedom of speech too far, but also those who took images too much to heart. "I consider this caricature to be beyond the pale. One can joke about any topic in the kitchen, but it is not right to do it publicly. . . Truth be told, the reaction was extremely wild on this thing. We all lack tolerance. These heedless caricaturists and those who immediately grab daggers especially lack it. It is difficult to say how a caricaturist should know where to stop. It all depends on upbringing. Some say you can laugh about this, others say you cannot. . . Absolute freedom of speech is evil." Ekspress K's deputy editor in a separate piece agreed. "Regarding the firewall between 'can' and 'cannot' . . . I would say this: it all depends upon how his parents brought him up. A caricaturist should have unwritten rules. The most important is to do as you would have done unto you."

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